

The Effect of Women's Liberation on Women, on Men and on Children

Today women desire self-determination. This means that they want to choose certain goals for themselves and to be actively engaged in achieving these goals. The Women's Liberation Movement can best be seen as a conglomeration of different organizations which attempt to come to terms with what self-determination should be. The movement is not a unified one. Its diversity is its vitality; it is a testimony to the fact that women are now for the first time in history creating their own future.

The question which faces us then is not whether there should be a Women's Liberation Movement, but what effect is this movement having? How has it changed female identity and male identity? The answer to these questions depends on what it means to be a woman; or, to express it philosophically, how you relate to women will depend on what you understand as defining the nature of women.

Freud thought that to be a woman meant to be an inferior kind of man. We could say that he gave a biological definition of woman which tied her nature to the lack of a penis. In fact at times, Freud even implied that everything woman tried to do could be seen as a way of compensating for this biological deficien-

cy.¹

Margaret Mead, in reaction to Freud, defined woman in terms of her ability to bear children. Here, the woman becomes biologically superior and everything that man attempted to do was a compensation for his inability to create through giving birth to a human being.²

Historically women were exposed to the Freudian view quite extensively after the war. It is not surprising that they then accepted the views of an anthropologist who desired to give them back a sense of worth. Women stayed home and had large families. In rejecting Freud they accepted another biological definition which grew to be nearly as oppressive. Because our society is a technological one, it became evident that the simple solutions to female identity which may have worked in primitive tribes could not work here. Slowly a desire for a new identity emerged. In the sixties the Women's Liberation Movement began to appear.³

1. Sigmund Freud "The Psychology of Woman". New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis. Her highest achievement becomes giving birth to a male child.
2. Margaret Mead Male and Female. See also in The Feminine Mystique by Betty Friedan, "The Sexual Solopism of Sigmund Freud" and "The Functional Freeze and Margaret Mead".
3. Friedan traces this historical development in The Feminine Mystique.

After the recognition that women were blocked in their attempt to create the identity they desired, an evaluation of the sources of women's expression began. Many answers were suggested, and the development of the separate wings of the Women's Movement correspond roughly to these differences. There are two basic kinds of approaches: the argument which claims that oppression is basically sexist and the argument which claims that oppression is basically economic. I should mention, however, that it is common to all groups in Women's Liberation to maintain that women are oppressed both sexually and economically. The disagreement occurs primarily over which kind of oppression is more fundamental.

Those who argue along sexist lines base their position on the inherent patriarchal structure of the family. They claim that the male assumes a superiority which is unjustified and oppressive to women, that as long as a small boy can believe he is superior to one half of the human race by virtue of being born male he will never overcome the desire to oppress other groups on racist or economic grounds.¹ To be self-determined, then, means to become freed from the desire to dominate anyone. For

1. This position was expressed first by John Stuart Mill in The Subjection of Women.

women, this particularly means to become freed from the structure of patriarchy. In the extreme it demands a rejection of the nuclear family and finally an acceptance of lesbianism. The women who base their understanding of oppression on sexist lines are called 'feminists'.¹

The opposite pole of the women's movement bases its understanding of oppression on economic arguments. While they agree that women are sexually oppressed, they would argue that they are even more fundamentally oppressed by the economic power structure of our society. For these women, there is no end of sexual oppression until there is an end to economic oppression. They argue that women are kept dependent and servile because it profits the society to do so. In the case of the housewife, the business world is getting two workers, the husband a wife, who is an unpaid labourer or one that earns only room and board, for the price of one worker; and in the case of the working women, the business world is getting a cheap labour pool which fills mostly menial job positions. These women who argue on economic lines are usually called 'Marxists'.²

The one characteristic common to the feminists and the Marxists is the desire to revolutionize society.

1. In Canada T. Grace Atkinson represents this position.
2. In Canada Marlene Dixon represents this position.

They are willing to sacrifice a great deal to do so, and they have little time for what they call reform movement. Further, for both the family is an oppressive unit. For the feminist, it is oppressive because of its inherent patriarchal structure; and for the Marxist, because of its exploitation of the economic dependence of the wife.

In between the Marxist and feminist extremes, the Women's Liberation Movement also has a third segment which probably constitutes the majority of its adherents. These are the masses of women who do not desire a radical transformation of society. They are frequently middle and upper class women; and they are usually married, or liveing with men. This wing of the movemtn focuses most of its energy on the discrimination against women in society as it is. It organizes around day-care centers, abortion law repeal, equal pay for equal work, equality within marriage, and so on. These women are called 'moderates'.¹

We are faced today with a situation that is quite different from the one which existed when the Women's Liberation Movement first appeared in the late sixties. At that time, women were going through severe identity crises because there

1. In Canada, NOW the branch of the American National Organization for Woman represents this position. Betty Friedan founded the organization. Further, the Royal Commission on the Status of Women recommendations can be classified as moderate.

seemed to be so few alternatives, the role of housewife and of mother was the only acceptable one. In less than ten years the situation has changed dramatically. Today, we could even say that women are going through identity crises because there are so many alternatives. Within the movement itself, there are several possible choices; and frequently, they bewilder the frustrated woman who is struggling with self-determination. In addition to the fact that the alternatives appear to be so contradictory, the women who are deeply involved in the movement and have themselves made a choice for the feminist, Marxist, or moderate approach frequently apply tremendous pressure on the women on the outside who are struggling for their own identity. While this is a difficult situation, there is no doubt that it is far better than the previous one when the choice was so limited. It is important, however, in assessing the effect that the movement is having on women themselves, to keep this change in mind.

The whole question of self-determination for women is further complicated by the growing awareness of two dimensions in our contemporary culture: the influence of socialization and the power of technology. In the first case, there is a tendency in some women in rejecting the biological definition of woman, to blame everything on society itself. This occurred to some extent from the popularization of certain sociological theories, particularly those which assumed a relativistic world view.¹ While

1. See B.F. Skinner Walden Two.

it was clearly true that the myths surrounding women which were perpetuated by children stories, television, and the schools were quite limiting for the full human development of women, it is important to recognize that women are not merely a product of their environment.

Similarly while technology can free women from many things, from being continuously pregnant, from the heavy and time consuming work in the home, it does not follow that technology will of itself bring about a revolution of human relations. Some women in the movement claim that women will only be liberated when they no longer have to bear children. They look forward to the perfecting of test-tube babies.¹

The tendency to rely so heavily on technology and on the powers of socialization are due to a misunderstanding of the richness of the nature of woman. Those who do this reject much of what is contained in our culture that has value. They found the situation so oppressive that they escaped from it rather than transformed it. None-the-less, it is true that the awakening to the potentiality for women in transforming the process of socialization and in the reasonable use of technology has

1. Shalmith Firestone in The Dialectic of Sex takes this view.

been a major factor in the women's movement. Women are beginning to take some control over the forces that create their self-image. In doing this, they are defining themselves as they would like to be as well as opening a world to their children which is a little more humane.

It is not surprising that the changes in identity which have effected women would produce a reaction in men. If we just focus on the upsurge in women of the desire for self-determination, for equality in their relationships with men, we find a wide range of traditional role patterns thrown out. Women have gained a certain confidence in themselves as a result of the Women's Liberation Movement and this confidence has given them the strength to act as a catalyst for social change.

At this time there seem to be three general kinds of reaction on the part of men. The first could be called the 'machismo reaction'. Here, the man reacts by a vigorous exhaltation of masculinity and attempts to overcome the woman's movement by joking or ridiculing it. Furthermore, he frequently seeks the company of unliberated women who also make a fetish out of their femininity. The group of women called 'Pussycats' have organized around this premise. Further, the machismo reaction usually reduces the relations between women and men to primarily sexual dimensions. He

thinks that women love being dominated, that they cannot be happy unless their 'inner spaces' are filled.

A second kind of male reaction is directly counter to the first. Here, we find what I would call the 'withdrawal reaction'. These men prefer to retreat to the company of men rather than go through the trouble of transforming their relations with women. They frequently give intellectual assent to the movement, but personally cannot overcome the attitudes which they carried with them from childhood. In particular their commitment to heterosexuality is weak and they prefer to avoid the period of conflict which is so central to any transformation of social patterns. In contrast to the machismo attitude of ridicule towards women, we find here a pattern of indifference towards women. Many of these men turn to homosexuality. In this they are similar to the feminists who withdraw from the company of men. It is the logical result of a disillusionment with heterosexuality. It is for this reason as well that there is an uneasy alliance between male and female homosexuals in Gay Liberation.

A third general reaction of men to the Women's Liberation Movement is the 'acceptance reaction'. Many men are discovering after the first period of difficulty encountered in adjusting to the changing self-image of

women that they prefer the new equality. Those who have overcome their unconscious need to live in certain accepted male roles have discovered that their masculine nature was not dependent upon the subjugation of the female. They have developed a new sense of confidence in themselves and have realized how much richer their relationships with women are when the master-slave pattern is exchanged for one of equality in friendship.¹

We could say then that one effect of the Women's Liberation Movement has been to force men to evaluate their own identity. It seems evident that as women become more and more convinced of their right to self-determination that identity crises in men will increase. It is essential to understand this change as a potential for tremendous growth in human relations and not to focus too much on the periods of tension and anxiety associated with the first awareness of crisis in identity.

It further follows that when women and men are deeply affected in their own self-image that it will effect their children. The first obvious good effect of the disappearance of the patriarchal family structure is the change in the power structure that presently dominates children. Specifically, if the husband no longer feels the need to dominate the wife, it is likely that the wife

1. Many of the letters written to Ms. Magazine from men express this reaction.

will not feel the need to dominate the children. Furthermore, if the work in the home is more equitably shared then the children will benefit from the contact with the father, a contact that is frequently missing in our suburban society.

Of course, the problem that has plagued the Women's Liberation Movement is that women have become so disillusioned with the possibility of transforming the family situation that they have chosen to leave the family altogether. There is no question that this has had a very negative effect on children who always suffer when their parents separate.

On this point I am one of the few in the Women's Liberation Movement who believe in the importance of long-term commitment. The family has provided that structure traditionally, and it is my belief that it still could. By family I do not mean necessarily the nuclear family, but perhaps a recreated extended family. The main point is that there must be some secure long-term relationships which can provide the basis for children to grow in strength and confidence.

One of the reasons women have rejected the family altogether is tied up with their rejection of love.¹

1. See Germaine Greer The Female Eunuch, "The Middle-Class Myth of Love and Marriage".

They feel that love has been mystified to such an extent that it kept them in their oppressed situation. They did nothing for money, everything for love. For this reason they have concluded that love is an empty slogan. One could even say that love has grown cold on the earth.

It is my view however that it is only through love that people grow, and that we must always resist the temptation to turn disappointment in love to bitterness and pessimism. The tremendous anger in the women's movement towards men, towards the family, and towards children must be channelled into a creative force which can provide the basis for new relationships which in the end produce people more capable of loving.

Finally, I would like to discuss the relation between the Women's Liberation Movement and therapy. In the first place, it must be pointed out that many women have been damaged by their encounter with therapy. When Freudianism came to North America after the war it was accepted almost completely. Any woman who tried to break out of the socially accepted role encountered in her therapist an attitude which could only increase her anxiety about her desire for self-determination. Specifically she was led to believe that her desires for independence were a form of

penis envy.¹

The more fundamental questions about therapy were not being asked at that time. Specifically, it was not thought to be the role of the therapist to question the structure of society, rather he or she was supposed to help the patient to fit back into society as it was presently structured. With more current developments in radical therapy the question of the correctness or sanity of society itself has arisen.

It is in this context that women in the Women's Liberation Movement have made several criticisms of therapists. We could divide the evaluations into roughly the same three categories used to describe the women's movement: the Marxist, the Feminist, and the moderate.

The first approach, the economic points out that the therapeutic situation limits its value to primarily upper-middle and upper class patients. All the therapists fall into the same class category as well. This means that it serves to perpetuate the values of that class

1. It should be pointed out that women therapists were as guilty of perpetuating this myth as men. Cf. Karen Horney Feminine Psychology and Dr. M. Robinson The Power of Sexual Surrender.

rather than work towards the redistribution of wealth. Further, it depends upon an ability to articulate or verbalize one's feelings -- an ability which is frequently missing in lower class contexts. And perhaps most important, it focuses anger and hostility onto individual adjustment instead of channelling it into political activity.

The Marxist criticisms which relate directly to women in the therapeutic situation point out that the traditional concern to help the woman be satisfied with her role as housewife ignored the same fact which led them to ask patients to pay for therapy. They argued on the one hand that a patient would not value what he or she got if it were not paid for, while on the other hand, they ignored the fact that housewives felt that their work had no value in our society because they were not paid for it. Furthermore, the therapist tended to resort to the view that certain subsidiary positions were 'natural' to women, like secretary, nurse, school teacher, etc. when in fact they were one more example of the tremendous exploitation of women as a maintenance class. The free work which the woman provided in the home was just transferred into cheap labour in the society.

Finally, the Marxists pointed out that it was to the great benefit of the capitalist system to keep the woman

in the home. If all external outlets for creativity were taken away, then all the energy and desire for activity would be channelled into buying things for the home, for the children, for the husband. The woman became the professional consumer.¹

The feminist criticisms of the therapeutic situation stem from the usual sexist structure of the relation between the therapist and the patient. They pointed out that because most therapists were men and most patients women, once again the woman found herself in a dependent situation. Furthermore, the therapist, if male, came into the situation with certain values which often conflicted with his patient. In this case the antagonism would become part of the therapeutic situation. They may share a class perspective, but they are of different sexes. The problem would emerge, for example, when the therapist found himself identifying more with men than with the patient. For example, if the patient complained about being accosted on the street and the therapist answered her by saying 'Well, you are attractive', his reference point would be obvious. Further he has his own relation with his wife to consider, and many of the attitudes his

1. See Betty Friedan The Feminine Mystique.

patient is struggling with could run directly counter to his own preferences. The feminists claim then that it is essential that the therapist recognize how much he brings his own values into the situation, and how frequently these values are the same ones that the patient is trying to overcome.

In the extreme, some radical therapists are proposing to break the traditional taboo against sexual relations between therapists and patients. It is pointed out that once again women are placed in a situation of sexual exploitation. In addition to the underlying view that a woman will overcome her identity crisis if only she has a good lover,¹ we find as well a desire on the part of the male therapist to relate to the woman in primarily sexual ways instead of integrating the sexual dimension of the relationship into a full human context. The final outrage is that here the woman has to pay for her sexual exploitation.²

Finally, the Feminists who are lesbians argue that most therapists view homosexuality as a sickness and that

1. See Erik Erikson Childhood and Society for the view that a woman needs her 'inner spaces' to be filled in order to be happy.
2. Dr. Martin Shepard in The Love Treatment: Sexual Intimacy between Patients and Psychotherapists. Also see the review of this book by Ellen Willis in the New York Review of Books, August 31, 1972.

they increase the patient's feelings of guilt and negative identity rather than giving them the strength they need to create for themselves a way of life that is meaningful and accepting of their sexual preference. In the extreme, the feminists believe that homosexuality is better than heterosexuality and one could say that they have adopted a reverse sexism.

The moderates in the women's movement do not in general criticise the economic or sexist structure of therapy itself. Rather they direct their criticisms towards individual therapists who have not become sensitive to their own prejudices or to the needs of women. They would say that it is the therapist's responsibility to read literature from the Women's Liberation Movement, to become aware of the difficulties facing women today, to give women the strength to determine the direction of their lives without forcing any particular way of life on them. They would say that the Women's Liberation Movement has had a profound effect on the way women think of themselves, and on men, and that this effect will be felt even more deeply in the future. It is necessary for each therapist to come to terms with the movement in his or her own life, in relations with friends and associates, and only then will the therapist be able to help the patient

become integrated and able to function confidently and creatively.¹

The Women's Liberation Movement then has had a profound effect on the way women understand their own identity. First it has awakened them to the desire for self-determination, and second, it has offered them several alternative views about what self-determination should be.

What women will become will reflect to a great extent what they have been. There are many in the movement who would lead us to believe that true liberation for women will consist in the total disappearance of sexual differentiation.² The appeal of unisex is, in my mind, as pernicious as the misconceived polarity which historically has tied men and women to certain rigid behavior patterns. The traditional polarity considered reflection, activity, outward directed energy, toughness, and need to dominate with maleness; and

1. A book which may be of interest to you has just come to my attention. Woman and Madness by Phyllis Chester is a detailed study of what is considered to constitute insanity in the case of women and how it differs from what constitutes insecurity in the case of men. Further, she studies the relation between mental disorders in women and their attempt to question certain values connected with their identity as women. The book is published by Doubleday & Co.
2. Shulamith Firestone and Kate Millett both maintain this position.

inhibition, passivity, inward directed energy, sensitivity, and need to be dominated with femaleness.

The mistake in this traditional view rested on the assumption that men and women were different in respect to their faculties.¹ This assumption has been at the root of philosophical concepts of the nature of man and women since Aristotle. Since psychology was a branch of philosophy at its inception, it is not surprising to discover the same concepts reappearing. Aristotle claimed that a woman is good by obeying, not commanding, by being silent not speaking, by preserving not acquiring, by having true opinion, not wisdom, and by entering into friendships of inequality not equality.² The criteria for being a good woman was considered to be quite different from the criteria for being a good man. Today it has been discovered that the criteria for being a normally adjusted male is quite different from the criteria for a normally adjusted female. Another way of expressing this is to say that the same characteristics which would describe a neurotic male would be used to describe a well-adjusted female.³

1. Karl Stein in Flight from Woman identifies women with intuition and men with reflection.
2. See C. Garside, "Can a Woman be Good in the Same Way as a Man?" in Dialogue, Vol X, 1971, No. 3 for a detailed study of this in Kierkegaard and Aristotle.
3. Jessie Bernard, Woman and the Public Interest.

Specifically, dependency, passivity, vanity, and emotionality are considered to be associated with female adjustment. Further, it has been shown that as males adapt to sex-role identity their self-esteem increases and as females adjust to their sex-role identity their self-esteem lessens and anxiety increases.¹

The rejection of these artificial differences between men and women will not result in a disappearance of the polarity between the sexes. While the faculties of reason, intuition, and will are the same for all persons, the data differs with sex, nationality, class and so forth. To determine oneself then means to unify the data one is given by virtue of being born a particular sex, race, in a particular place, and of a certain class. What women will become will be a transcendence of their past, not a total rejection of it. It will include the fact that our bodies are different from male bodies, that certain experiences therefore are different, that our present social situation is different, and that our archetypes are different. When all these factors are taken into consideration a true polarity of the sexes will emerge.

1. Also Conell & Johnson, *Developmental Psychology*, 1970, "The Relationship between Sex Role Identification and Self-Esteem in Early Adolescence", Masson, Langer, and Kagan, Child Development and Personality.